

Caring about sharing ware: Mike Gerrard asks if the British are ...

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Caring about sharing ware

Mike Gerrard asks if the British are honest enough to make the shareware program system work as well as it does in America

DOES shareware work in Britain? Not according to Sandra Sharkey, who has many shareware programs in the the Deja Vu software library that she runs in Wigan.

Shareware is a system devised in America, which relies on a user's honesty. Copies of programs can be passed around freely: often they are distributed by shareware libraries or made available for downloading from bulletin boards. It costs little to try a program to see if you like it. People who find they use a program regularly are then asked to send a small payment, often direct to the programmer's address. The system works well enough in America, where some shareware suppliers have become famous. But it doesn't seem to work very well in Britain.

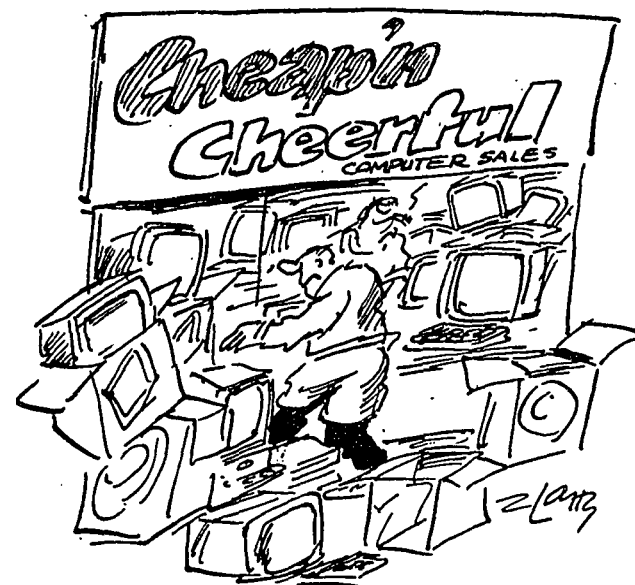
"I personally know lots of disgruntled programmers," Sandra Sharkey says. "I also run the AMOS library, which is for programs written using Mandarin's AMOS programming language. I know how many copies are sold, because they have to go through me, and the number of payments that people receive is a tiny percentage of the actual sales. There are at least twenty programmers with shareware programs in the library who have

got nothing for their work."

The first software company to try publishing shareware programs in Britain is also based in Wigan: Freeway Software. The company has only published three shareware programs for IBM-PC compatibles, yet now employs a full-time staff of eight people. Their success shows the approach that has to be made to tap into the substantial market for cut-price programs.

"We started in August 1986," says Freeway's Director, Malcolm Foster, "and chose shareware because of its cost advantages as we didn't have hundreds of thousands of pounds to spend on advertising. Also, that summer Amstrad announced its first cheap PC-compatible. Rumours were that hardware and software prices were going to tumble, so that seemed to make it more feasible to sell at shareware prices as we knew what was happening with shareware in America, thanks to contacts with groups like the IBM-PC User Group."

Freeway's shareware programs (cashbook, ledger and payroll packages) are available initially for about £9, for which users get full working programs and an introductory manual on disc. Copies of these can be passed around freely



without breach of copyright, giving users chance to sample the programs and decide whether to register. Registration costs about £45 and provides a complete manual and full software support.

"It took us two or three years to get rolling," says Foster, "as shareware was virtually unknown as a concept in this country then, but slowly libraries opened and we began to get a good name. This was partly because we were the first to produce full-scale packages of this kind in this way, but also I think because it helps if you're in the same country as the authors, so that you can simply pick up the phone and sort out your problems. At that time a lot of stuff was coming from America and didn't offer the same direct support."

So shareware is working for Freeway? "It's been very effective," Foster confirms. "In

our last year our turnover was up by 50 per cent, and this in an economic climate when you're considered to be doing well if you're standing still. Previously we'd seen growth at about 150 per cent per year."

Freeway's protection against copying is that users can only get the best from the programs by buying the full manual, but how can games publishers safeguard their investment, if users can't be trusted? One of the biggest providers of shareware games is the American company, Apogee, whose turnover last year of \$22 million shows the market that exists.

Apogee's games are distributed here by PSA, whose Patrick Alexander reckons that shareware only works in Britain if you give people an incentive to register. "Everything we do," he says, "offers something over and above what comes on the original disc.

If you like a game and then register, you get extra discs with different games scenarios on, or the shareware disc will have the first level and people get the rest of the game. That seems fair, as people then get to try the game for just the cost of the disc from a library or a friend, and they only buy the rest if they're impressed. You can't say that about most commercial releases, where you have to go by a screenshot on the box, which may not even be from the same machine."

ONE games writer who has done well by relying on the honesty of users is Jeff Minter. This veteran programmer has worked on contract for large software houses, has published games on his own Llamasoft label and recently released his Llamatron program as shareware on the Atari ST. Registrations from 800 people at £5 each have brought him £4,000 to date. With registrations still arriving and an Amiga version just out, he hopes to make about £10,000 from the game — not as much as a conventional release, but more than a budget game would generate.

But Minter's success doesn't persuade Sandra Sharkey — or other programmers and publishers I spoke to — that straight shareware will ever be viable in Britain. "Honesty doesn't work," insists Sharkey. "I think the Jeff Minter thing was an exception, as his game was used on a magazine cover disc so it got a lot more exposure than normal, and he already has a cult following. But if you compare the response of a few hundred to the tens of thousands of people who have probably played the game, then it works out that quite a low percentage of people have actually sent him money."

Despite this, there are still a lot of talented programmers who are happy to make their programs available cheaply, if they get a few pounds for their efforts. To make this possible, Sandra Sharkey came up with the concept of licenceware, which is now spreading. Discs are sold for £3.50, of which the programmer gets 70p. "That may not sound much," she says, "but it soon mounts up. One programmer is getting royalty cheques well into four figures every quarter."

To ensure that programs are not merely copied and passed on, distributors must sign a contract with Deja Vu and satisfy various conditions. Programs can only be sold with the official Deja Vu label, which must match the program's loading screen. If the two don't match, users are asked to report the matter back to Deja Vu. "Some buyers may not bother," says Sharkey, "but it only takes one honest person to get a distributor into trouble for trying to do an author out of his royalty. It has happened once or twice, but I think most feel that it isn't worth the risk. "So my licenceware authors generally get their royalties. I've just done my last quarter's returns and we've sold 7,266 copies of the various licenceware programs — that's across about 60 titles in total — so I'm paying out about £5,000 a quarter in royalties. That's an awful lot of 70p's!"

Deja Vu, 25 Park Road, Wigan WN6 7AA (0942 495261). Freeway, PO Box 33, Wigan WN6 0JX (0257 472006). PSA, 3 Valley Court Offices, Lower Road, Croydon, Nr Royston, Herts SG8 0HF (0223 208288). Llamasoft games are available from Goodman Enterprises, 16 Conrad Close, Meir Hay Estate, Longton, Stoke-on-Trent ST3 1SW (0782 335650).

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